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ABSTRACT

Students in the Southwest Baptist University's speech and debate program actively participate in recruiting and contribute to the small college's culture. While scholarship on peer recruitment is scarce, the literature suggests two foundational principles that can serve as guides: colleges and universities must be willing to develop personal relationships with those students they are interested in recruiting; and students are better at "painting the big picture" than college personnel are. Certain peer-recruitment strategies can contribute to a competitive and progressive speech and debate program on any level: coaches can facilitate associations between high school and university competitors; students can refer individuals from their own high school program; undergraduates can participate in the professional community; and students can make telephone calls, conduct campus tours, and accompany the coaching staff on prospect visits. Benefits of peer recruiting include: empowering new students by letting them know they feel wanted; creating bonds between the incoming student, the seasoned forensics competitor, and coaches or faculty sponsors; creating an openness among students; taking the sole recruiting burden off coaches; and instilling in students the value of responsibility. By remembering the foundational principles of relationship-building and honesty, observing various strategies of peer-recruitment, and understanding the benefits of allowing students to recruit students, most programs can become more successful in obtaining the kinds of individuals who accept and thrive within their particular forensic cultures. (RS)

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The Student's Role in Recruiting: Methods and Benefits

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The Student's Role in Recruiting: Methods and Benefits

Of increasing importance to college and university teachers and administrators is the need for viable yet novel recruiting techniques that will propel their institutions or extra curricular programs well into the next century. Hale and Warnemunde (1983) explain that colleges and universities see a need to "market" actively their university in order to reach the declining student population. Specifically, communication departments must also take a more active role in recruiting. Hale and Warnemunde (1983) continue by explaining that "department involvement in recruiting activities is virtually ignored in the marketing literature" (p. 70). Consequently, some of the more effective strategies that departments use in recruiting students may be overlooked. For instance, peer involvement is one avenue of recruiting that is vital to the existence of a university yet there is very little research that discusses the merits of students recruiting students. The above statement sets the foundation for the question: How do students actively participate in recruiting and how does their

participation contribute to the small-college culture? To answer this question we will focus on the peer recruiting practices of the speech and debate program at our institution, Southwest Baptist University. First, however, we will examine two major principles needed for the development of a peer recruiting system. Next, some of our practiced student-led recruiting methods will be discussed. Finally, we will suggest some benefits of incorporating a peer-recruitment program.

Foundational principles for a peer-recruitment system

To say that scholarship focusing on, advocating, or even mentioning various methods of peer-recruitment is scarce is a massive understatement. A review of the journals, as well as an analysis of various educational indexes uncovered nothing that explores the students-recruiting-students option. The literature does, however, suggest what we believe are two foundational principles that can serve as guides to the program wishing to encourage more student involvement in the recruiting process.

Initially, colleges and universities must be

willing to develop personal relationships with those students they are interested in recruiting. As M. Fredric Volkmann (1990), Associate Vice Chancellor and Director of Public Relations at Washington University in St. Louis notes, "As more technology emerges to support recruitment work, we'll see a backlash toward 'high touch.' Today's student prospects expect more personal attention in the mailings they currently receive" (p. 24). Similarly, Brice W. Harris (1990), Vice Chancellor of institutional Services, Metropolitan Community Colleges, argues that "We'll move away from sophisticated media recruitment and back to person recruitment" (p. 24). High school students are no longer willing to accept simple mailings--no matter how beautifully constructed they are. Certainly, this is an advantage to the program that wants to maximize recruiting dollars. The development of personal relationships between our scholars and recruits is appealing, less expensive, and, as will be discussed later, has many benefits. Harris (1990) suggests that "many colleges and universities will rely more heavily on building personal relationships with students" (p.

25). It almost goes without saying that students are often more equipped--because of experience, proximity in age, and understanding-level--to develop the necessary kinds of relationships.

A second foundational principle for the development of a peer-recruitment program follows the notion that students are better at "painting the big picture" than we, as coaches, are. Although we try to portray the nature of our programs as accurately as possible, and although we try to be discerning critics of those we are recruiting, it often becomes difficult to communicate those ideas which capture the true essence of our forensic philosophy. Richard Moll (1990), former director of admissions at Bowdoin and Vassar colleges and the University of California, Santa Cruz observes that "[w]ith waning guidance in the home, the school, and the church or synagogue, these young people yearn for direct, spoken, honest consultation regarding their future" (p. 25). Our experience indicates that our forensic scholars are often more adept at discovering the needs, experiences, and habits of potential competitors than we, the staff, are.

Peer-recruitment methods

Obviously, a number of factors must be considered when developing methods of recruitment for individual programs; what is appropriate for a small, midwestern, religiously affiliated, liberal arts college might not be successful for a large urban, commuter university. We suggest, however, there are certain strategies which transcend university-type and, hopefully, can contribute to a competitive and progressive speech and debate program on any level. Because of the lack of available research, it is difficult to know which, if any, of the following strategies are the most successful. They are, nevertheless, factors which have been labelled as contributions to the recruitment of forensic scholars involved with our program.

Initially, intercollegiate speech and debate coaches must facilitate associations between high school and university competitors. An easy method of encouraging such development is the promotion of local high school tournaments. Aside from the fact that most tournament directors are more than happy to have the judging help, such interactions provide public

relations and recruitment opportunities for your university as well. Many of our competitors spend "free" weekends judging high school debate and individual events competitions and the benefits have been immeasurable. Peers are often able to paint a much clearer picture of the positives and negatives of a particular program than are the coaching staff. Surprisingly, our forensic scholars even have the ability to identify high school participants whose personalities and styles are consistent with our philosophy of competition. A number of our participants, in the informal questionnaire we circulated, cited being encouraged to attend our university by student-judges at local and regional tournaments. In turn, we have discovered that those students who were "discovered" at local tournaments have been more likely to encourage others. In essence, the most profitable strategy for coaches includes the promotion of judging opportunities at local high school tournaments.

A second manner in which students can aid in the recruitment process is in the referral of individuals

from one's own high school program. This strategy is, at least in part, grounded in the success of the particular intercollegiate program in serving the academic-competitive needs of its participants. If we, as coaches, attempt to make programs relevant to the needs of individuals then we may expect to reap the benefits of our students' satisfaction. Our program, for example, has a total of six competitors from two different high schools. Within the last few years one of the secondary schools has sent a total of five speakers to our program (including the authors of this paper) because of the relationships between participants on both the high school and college teams. Although it demands that forensic coaches continuously develop and refine programs that are relevant and progressive, the "alma mater funnel" can be a valuable recruiting tool.

A third method of peer recruiting involves undergraduate participation in the professional community. Our state organization, the Speech and Theater Association of Missouri (STAM), provides many opportunities for students not only to attend the

annual meeting, but to participate actively in the decision-making processes that affect both high school and college speech teachers. Regular interaction between intercollegiate competitors and high school coaches can help cultivate positive perceptions of university forensic programs. High school directors are less likely to be afraid to send their students to a particular program when they know they will be appropriately regarded and developed. In addition, the networking opportunities are an added benefit for the intercollegiate scholar.

Finally, students on our campus have also taken a more traditional route in peer recruiting: they make phone calls, conduct campus tours, and accompany the coaching staff on prospect visits. Our school, because it is a small liberal arts college, has some rather unique qualities that make peer recruiting particularly important. Although a definite advantage to some students, the religious nature of our institution, along with its required courses in Old Testament, New Testament, and Christian living, has, traditionally, been somewhat of an obstacle for some who might

consider our program. In addition, because we are so small, we have a definite limitation on major areas of study. It has been imperative for us to allow students to speak freely to potential applicants about University expectations as well as academic offerings. We certainly want our students to have an accurate picture of the nature of our institution as well as the focus of our program. The important principal for institutions wanting to develop a peer recruiting program is that recruits must have the freedom to ask pointed questions and get honest responses. Although we attempt to be as objective as possible, we, as coaches, do not see our programs without bias. Again, however, we are challenged to direct the kinds of programs that provide sound pedagogical practices as well as appropriate levels of competition.

Benefits of Recruiting

There are several benefits to the recruiters, recruits, and also to the university that fully supports the concept of students recruiting students. For instance, giving members of a forensics squad the opportunity to assist in such an important element of

the program's continued success actually empowers the new students and lets them know that they are more likely to come to a school where they feel wanted. For example, several students at Southwest Baptist University have mentioned that one of the primary reasons they chose SBU over other universities was because the upper level students made them feel comfortable during the campus tours and meal time spent in discussion. Also, giving the forensics scholars the responsibility of showing students the campus and discussing the merits of the university over lunch gives the student recruiter a sense of accomplishment.

Next, student recruiting creates bonds between both the incoming student, the seasoned forensics competitor, and the coaches or faculty sponsors. Upperclass scholars who have competed for several years feel a strong bond and a sense of commitment to both the program and the coaches. The student recruiter can instill a sense of commitment and tradition in a new student that a coach or teaching assistant never could. Recruits expect a coach to laud praises about their particular speech squad. Yet, they feel that there is

a sense of camaraderie between themselves and the older students. New recruits feel that in this new relationship they will discover what competing for a particular university is really like. One of us remembers spending the night with students who were recruiting for our college forensics program. The information which they provided that evening was worth more than any discussions with professors or any information in pamphlets or viewbooks.

Student recruiting also creates an openness between students. As mentioned before, student recruiters can supply valuable information. However, they are also willing to listen to important questions. New students usually have several directions they are planning to go with their lives and understandably they have questions that are vital to their future. These may be questions that they feel uncomfortable asking the coaches. There questions could cover anything from scholarships to what is expected of a new student who wants to travel with a squad. Student recruiters feel open enough to share the truth and answer a new student's questions honestly. A coach who trusts his

squad will allow time for student interaction to take place. This interaction will create the openness needed for a true student recruiter/potential competitor dialogue to take place.

Students who recruit students take the sole recruiting burden off the shoulders of the coach. Many times during the end of a forensic year recruiting becomes something that is done between state competitions and national tournaments. Consequently, there seems to be very little time to interview and audition prospective students. Older competitors involved in the recruiting process gain a better understanding of the process that a coach must endure. By working together, coaches will be able to enjoy recruiting rather than suffering through the process, and students will better understand how a forensics program functions.

Finally, a student who has been with a squad for several years needs to assume the responsibility involved in student recruiting. So often students are used only for their competitive abilities and we forget the true gifts they have learned through competition:

the arts of persuasion and communication. If a coach focuses these abilities then his or her students are able to do much more than compete; the director can help them learn the value of responsibility. For example, at SBU we instill in our students the importance of developing a strong program. Even several years after students have left the university they are still searching for prospective forensics scholars. Each year we receive calls from alumni who want us to send a letter to or interview a student with whom they have been in contact. Almost invariably that prospective student turns out to be the kind of competitor for which our program has been looking. Our alumni have taken responsibility to help us develop our program even though they no longer compete. These graduated competitors have been instilled with a sense of tradition and pride that is built on years of delegated responsibility.

If student recruiting is done effectively then it will always be beneficial. By empowering students, creating bonds, creating openness, and giving students some responsibility, the concept of students recruiting

students should entice any coach and university administration into giving students the tools they need to be effective recruiters. In the next section the suggestions for incorporating a student recruiting program will provide a starting place for those interested in helping students learn how to recruit effectively other students.

Conclusion

As has been mentioned, the small-college culture is unique, particularly when the institution is religious in nature. Our student-teacher-administrator relationships are not typical in that we are more likely to interact socially on a regular basis--we attend church together, we shop in the same stores, we participate in the same community activities, etc. The closeness of the SBU community certainly has become a selling point for our admissions representatives. A peer-recruiting system is valuable to us because students are able to share in and communicate about those aspects which make our school, community, and program different from others. We acknowledge that students may be better at "selling" our unique qualities. Likewise, we believe that by remembering the foundational principles of

relationship-building and honesty, observing various strategies of peer-recruitment, and understanding the benefits of allowing students to recruit students, most all programs can become more successful in obtaining the kinds of individuals who accept and thrive within their particular forensic cultures.

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